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The stories in this collection take place on the island of Hawaii, also known as the Big Island. As inhabitants of a place widely considered as a paradise, the characters in these stories are unable to see their home as a paradise, and are forced find escape elsewhere.

# BIG ISLAND: STORIES

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

# EXIT BAG

Her first sin? Language. A curse word. Little Blithe loved to curse, loved the feeling it gave her. The way a single word, like a spear, could penetrate and wound; the way it bludgeoned and smashed people, entire rooms. She cursed in the street and on the playgrounds, cursed in whispers to her brother Reynaldo during mass—sounds too silent to stop the priest speaking—little Reynaldo lifting his eyes to her, then toward the vaulted ceiling. His body would shrink; Little Blithe loved it.

But, there was often a price for sinning. If it were her mother she owed, it was exacted with the rice paddle or the wooden spoon in several spanks to her behind.

Her father liked the belt best. He made her kneel once, in front of the crucifix, on uncooked rice, on the yellowing linoleum in the kitchen. Because of Reynaldo. But, her father wouldn't listen. She had sinned and needed to repent. Kneeling, with the grains of rice buried in her skin hard against the bone, she heard her father yank the belt from his pants. The jingle of the buckle and the slip through the denim loops, as if sharpened, was as painful as the leather against her skin. He told her to take off her shirt.

Coughing from the hall.

The sewing machine motor wheezed, accelerating, decelerating, then accelerating when she pressed the pedal again. From time-to-time, fits of coughing came from the

hall. The lung cancer. Mr. Cabal, 67-years-old, was paying for the sins of his youth, realizing for the first time only, maybe, that he was responsible. Blithe sat at the sewing machine, feeding the cuffed edge of an oven bag beneath the foot and needle. Reynaldo and the other hospice patients were asleep in their rooms. Just Blithe and the lung cancer, Mr. Cabal, who was in too much pain to sleep.

Blithe released the pedal. A crucifix hung on the wall beside the jalousie window. It was smaller than the one in her childhood home in Cebu, which had a carved, wooden figure of the wounded savior on it. This one was simply two intersecting pieces of wood with a stripe of pearled inlay that ran the length of each piece. If it weren't for the patients' families she would never have put it up. Hope, it gave them. There used to be a thermometer that hung in its place when this section of her house, the hospice ward, was the living room. Many years ago. The carpet had been pulled, then white linoleum lain, the couches replaced with ten plastic chairs which blended into the floor. For sitting, to wait. Now, there was a coffee table with the day's paper and a book of crossword puzzles on it. And the crucifix on the wall.

Blithe turned the knob to raise the needle. She inspected the cuff, the stitches. She snapped the bag in front of her, to fill it with air. Its plastic crackled against her ears as she slipped it over her head. She put her hands to the plastic and wrapped them around her neck with her thumbs in front and her fingers clasped behind. She waited. The draw of her breath grew longer, more labored, and through the hot, fogged plastic, the waiting room began to blacken around the edges. She pulled it off. Though she would never use it without the helium, clearly it could be done. But the hands would need to be tied.

Reynaldo would disapprove of this. He was kept in by his conservative ideas. Yet here he was, under Blithe's care, asleep in the room across the hall from Mr. Cabal because there was no one to look after him when their parents died. A whore, he had called her, when she told him about the man from Hawaii who'd asked her to marry him. Their parents' word, most likely. She was a whore because she'd answered *yes*, and would be leaving Cebu in less than a month. They were still kids, then. She was just out of school. A whore because she didn't love the man she was marrying, with whom she'd met and corresponded through letters only.

"I can learn," she said.

She didn't. As undependable as her father's moods, so was her contentment in marriage. Blithe the wife, just as Blithe the girl, would let her language go; loosed violent words aimed at her husband's softest places. He would cry, and when he reached out to touch her, she would slap his hands away. After what happened in the kitchen, she divorced him and took half of his shit

Again, the trash hadn't been taken to the dump. Piles of stinking paper and styrofoam were stacked on the lid and the floor around it, and the smell of rotting chicken and fruit drifted through every room of the house. Maggots wriggled across the tiles and had reached the carpet of the living room.

"You didn't take it to the dump," she said.

Blithe's husband leaned against the counter. He'd forgotten, he said. He took a coffee mug from the sink, rinsed it of its stains, and filled it with water.

“How you forget?” Blithe said. She watched him drink, taking the water in large gulps. He mumbled, with his lips still on the mug, that he didn’t know. Blithe let her language go; the words came fast and at such a great volume that her throat grew raw. She slapped the mug from his hand and it shattered across the tiles, the shrapnel fanning out toward the door. Still, he made no movement. Her chest heaved as she tried to take in more breath, to reload. Took aim and released again. Then, as if listening to her words for the first time since she began her assault, he lifted his eyes to her. Tears were collected at the edges of his eyes.

He sprang from the sink with his arms outstretched and caught Blithe’s neck with his left hand and covered her mouth with his right. He put her against the stove so that her back arched over the dials and her shoulders came down on the burners.

“You aren’t allowed!” he screamed. “You can’t.”

Blithe cut into the hem and threaded the elastic drawstring through until it had travelled the circumference of the bag’s opening. She adjusted the string so that both sides were the same length and fastened them together with a plastic toggle. Once again, she fit her head through the opening. She squeezed the toggle and slid the toggle up until she felt its cool plastic against her throat. In front of the mirror, she laughed at herself, at the silliness of her appearance. He would look hilarious with an oven bag on his head, his hair disheveled and clinging to the plastic, just as her own hair did now.

Mr. Cabal’s coughing came down the hall again. Blithe removed the bag from her head and tiptoed toward his room. She stood in the doorway and watched him squirm and

moan in his bed. He was drowning in his own liquid. Most likely, he'd be gone before the end of the month.

The other day, he'd asked her to call in a priest. Mr. Cabal, the Ilocano. Simple Mr. Cabal, whose ancestors left the mountains of Luzon to work the sugar plantations on the Big Island, the new territory, out across the Pacific. Tribal Mr. Cabal, vulnerable to superstition and beliefs. They all were like that. Simple and primitive. All of them, in every region, on all islands, across the entire country.

Reynaldo was likely the simplest of them all. Blithe wrote him for years, but he never responded until the winter of 84. He was weak under the word of their parents, of their father. Not until he needed her did the letter arrive, sealed in a navy envelope. In the corner, a certified, 40-peso stamp that commemorated the 3rd centenary of the Congregation of the Religious of the Virgin Mary. It showed an illustration of Ignacia del Espiritu Santo, her hands crossed in front at the wrists, a rosary dangling from her fingers—a pose, Blithe always imagined, that showed the saint's supplication toward God, a plea to keep her firm in choosing the monastery over marriage.

Reynaldo's wife had passed, the letter had read.

"She was unhappy," he wrote. "I wouldn't let her go."

His wife – a woman Blithe imagined to be thin and fair, short, hunched, whose bones were probably porous – was not allowed a divorce. The law mandated that on paper they would never be separated; Reynaldo demanded it in body. His wife used the garden sickle to open her arms and when he found her she was empty, skin white and stained with soil around the wounds.

Blithe wrote back, one line scribbled across the stationary.

"It's your fault."

No letters came from Reynaldo again. He never learned of Blithe's divorce. She never told him of her days in the Wainaku apartments, with no money. He didn't know that she later became a nurse, that she had saved and bought a three-bedroom house near the volcano. She never wrote back to say that she'd left her job at the nursing home and that she was now a business owner. No letters were sent.

Yet, here he was, asleep in her home after all these years. Blithe opened his door, leaned into it lightly to keep the hinges from squeaking. His hair was colored like ash, creases on his cheeks and around his eyes. He lay on his stomach on top of the comforter, snoring quietly. Her little brother, the boy who would shrink when she cursed, who was not their father's first born, but the first-born son, furrowed his brow even in sleep. His nervous system allowed him rest, for once. The shaking, the delusions and hallucinations were at rest this night.

Blithe would take care of him. She would help him do the thing he secretly wanted, but would not allow himself to think was possible.

In the waiting room she lifted the long helium tank. It was light and cool to the touch. With the tank cradled under one arm and the oven bag and tubing in the other, she moved down the hall, her soles squeaking on the waxed floor, toward Reynaldo's room. She placed the tank beside his bed and began to uncoil the tubing. Six months he had lived with her, a stranger, under her roof, running naked through the halls, disturbing the

patients. Over the years she'd imagined what he looked like and always she returned to the image of the boy, casting his eyes upward in the chapel. She kissed his cheek.

Coughing from across the hall.

Through the doorway Blithe could see Mr. Cabal sitting up in his bed, his hand in a fist against his mouth. She shut Reynaldo's door behind her, crossed the hall into Mr. Cabal's room, and stood beside his bed. She rubbed his back and asked if there was anything she could do to help. He clutched his rosary.

"Hurts," he said. "Everything."

"Medicine not working?"

He said he was ashamed because he was afraid.

"Why am I afraid?" he said. "Everyone will be there."

"I call the priest in the morning," she said, and handed him two pills and a glass of water. She helped him to lay down again and stroked his thinning hair while listening to his rasp, the spilling fluid inside him. As he drifted out of consciousness, she uncoiled his fingers and took the sweaty rosary from him.

She returned to Reynaldo and strung his wrists and fingers with the rosary. She kissed him on the cheek once more.

The helium from the tank hissed when she turned the valve. Reynaldo, already sealed in, stirred but did not open his eyes. Blithe walked to the door and shut it, so as not to wake the sleeping patients.

# THE CONVERSION OF ADAM ALVEZ

"Back then, it was just me and Adam," said The Champ to the reporter when asked about an earlier time in his career.

"You're, of course, talking about Adam Alves. Adam Alves, former Island Rumble Champion…"

The Champ was impressed by her knowledge. But, that's how they were these days, these blog reporters. They knew every fighter, flyweight to heavyweight, every promotion, big, small, regional, international. They remembered everything that had ever happened in the sport's history. The Champ couldn't believe this guy remembered Island Rumble. The promotion had folded almost ten years ago after putting on three fights.

But, the reporter remembered Adam Alvez, too. Even The Champ had forgotten Adam and was only just remembering him for the first time in years after being asked about coming up, about training in Hilo, the time before turning pro. Could he have imagined then that he would become the lightweight champion of the biggest mixed martial arts promotion in the world, the reporter wanted to know. And, for reasons unknown to The Champ then, unknown to him still, he blurted out that stuff about "…just me and Adam."

He and Adam ran hard for years. He was seventeen when they first started hanging out. Adam was 18. They were roommates and training partners. He loved Adam because Adam was crazy as shit.

"We didn't really think about championships, just about fighting."

While the reporter typed on his computer The Champ was remembering something that had happened years ago, in the parking lot of Ken's Pancake House at two in the morning, with those eight marines. Adam started talking shit to one of the marines and the marine was talking shit back. They were about to fight. So what does Adam do? He reaches under his seat for a bb gun and cocks it in the marine's face, like, *What's up now?,* he cocks the fucking the bb gun. Then, here comes the Marine with a hammer and bashes Adam's car; punches Adam in the face. Next thing, the other seven come out to the parking lot and here come all eight marines.

*Adam, let's fucking go, dude.*

But, he was like that. Always drawing attention. Then, he got knocked out in the first round by Alameida; started smoking weed and tripped out and found God.

The punch that knocked out Adam in the first round came out of nowhere. It was a looping, overhand right that tagged him on the chin. Adam went limp. Alameida was so heavy-handed. The way he threw those overhand rights he could knock out anyone in the division.

But, was it an overhand right? Or, was it a hook? An accountant in Portland had once tried to remember which it was. An overhand or a hook that knocked out Adam Alves? Two years, eight months, three weeks and six days before the Champ was being interviewed by the reporter, The Accountant was in his office on the fifth floor of a building in downtown Portland, paralyzed with indecision. Should he or shouldn't he go to the gym after work? Clearly, he didn't have the time, with he and his wife's commitment to having family dinners, at the dinner table, at seven every night. Really, though, if he wanted to he could be out of the office by five. But, there was always extra work to do. When was the last time he'd gone to the gym? He'd gone last month, but before then it'd been four or five months.

The Accountant had been going back and forth with himself until he was unexpectedly carried away by his thoughts to a memory of an earlier time, a time when he was younger and in shape, back when he was still living in Hilo, going to college at UH, training and fighting. He looked good then, he thought, sitting up in his chair. The Accountant looked down at his stomach. He sucked it in so that he could clearly see his belt buckle, held his breath for a few seconds longer, then let go. He pinched his stomach, thinking about how easy it is to slip, to backslide.

Adam Alves? Whatever happened to that guy? The Accountant was having a hard time thinking about his younger, in-shape self, without seeing and hearing Adam; it had to have been an overhand. It seemed impossible to separate that period of his life from the memory of Adam, coming first as snippets of conversation, then broad strokes of scenes where Adam was doing this; moving this way; telling a joke; stretching on the

mat; eating chicken katsu at L & L. The Accountant settled on the hook. Adam's left hook was a beautiful thing. The Accountant never got tired of seeing him throw it, on the pads, sparring, in matches, the bag, wherever. There was a picture of Adam. Someone pinned it to the cork board in the gym office. It was a shot of the Alves v.s. Kanahele fight at the moment Kanahele got knocked out by that hook.

Adam threw it so tight, so close. In the clinch the opponent never saw it coming. The picture on the cork board was a perfect example. In it he's already connected with Kanahele's chin, and the way that punch looks, it's like he's saluting. It's that close. And, it's not like he had a short reach, either.

The Champ was seeing Adam's left hook, too. Sitting there, watching the reporter scan his notes, he saw the left hook against Kanahele's chin in the picture on the cork board in the gym office. He had cornered Adam in the Kanahele fight, so as he watched the reporter lift his head from his laptop to ask another question, he was seeing Adam KO Kanahele in both the picture and from cage-side, sometimes at the same time, sometimes one and then the other.

The Champ loved the way Adam fought. He fought crazy, like a crackhead, wild. He looked like one too; long and drawn out, lean, no body fat. And, he had this long, nasty hair that always had shit stuck it, leaves and dust. When he'd fight he'd put it up in corn rows. The Champ loved Adam.

“Let’s talk about your performance tonight,” the reporter said. “How do you feel? Overall?”

The Champ didn’t want to talk about his performance, but he said that he was obviously disappointed. The reporter was asking him about that final round, the take down. His take-down defense was one of the best in the division, but by round five it’s all about who’s still got gas in the tank. His tank always seemed to empty fast. No matter how much time he spent on conditioning in camp, he was usually gassing in the third or fourth. He thought that it probably had something to do with the way his nose was shaped, wide and with a short, flat bridge.

Many times The Champ had thought of getting that surgery done on his nose to help him breathe better. A lot of the other fighters had talked about its benefits. But, it seemed wrong to mess with your body like that, especially in sport.

“Pre-fight, you mentioned that your cardio was through the roof,” the reporter said. “What do you think happened in there?”

The Champ repeated what he’d said in the pre-fight interview. He said he didn’t know what happened.

“It is what it is.”

It was the easiest way to figure out things that didn’t make sense; some people talked about God, things happening for a reason.

He could hear Adam saying it; *Yo, fuck it. It is what it is.* And, the way he said it, all gangster ghetto, with his corn rows. He'd have his wife-beater on and The Champ would, too; thought they were so hard; they were like two peas in a pod. But, Adam always took things just a little further.

It was right there in the way he fought, too. He'd stand in the pocket and just exchange with the other guy. No defense. No head movement or footwork. Hands at his waist. Adam would square up and just start teeing off. He was going to knock the other guy out or get knocked out trying. Alameida knew it. He played it smart. He didn't get caught up in a brawl. He waited, picked his shots. Looked for those openings. There are always openings.

When the opening bell rang Adam ran across the cage. He jumped and tried to knock out Alameida with a flying knee, but missed. The crowd went nuts. No one in The Civic was sitting down after that. The floor seats, bleachers, all the way up the balcony rows, it was all chaos. The fans loved him. He was so raw. He left everything in there.

Adam put all he had into whatever he was doing. It didn't matter what it was. He'd do it until he had nothing left and then he'd move on. This is how a painter was remembering beautiful Adam Alvez as she sat alone in her studio in Humbolt County, California. She hadn't had a memory of that boy, that name, for twenty five, thirty, years. She found it amusing to have found him again.

The Painter was sitting on the cool, cement floor, cross-legged and smoking a cigarette. Adam never stuck to anything, she thought. He couldn't. Not with anyone. Not with her. The Painter laughed about it all. She laughed about being sixteen and having her heart broken for the first time. She laughed loudly when she remembered her eating disorder, how she'd called Adam a year after the break up to tell him that he was the reason for it. The Painter took a long drag from her cigarette and watched the cherry glow crawl and combust. The smoke stung her eyes. She thought of the pain and tears as a sign, karmic, the universe telling her that she was out of step and that there would be punishment. But, it all seemed just to The Painter, it was all fitting.

For a moment she allowed herself to think that Adam saw God after he got knocked out as a kind of retribution for the hurt he had caused her. But, that was silly. They were kids. And, his turn was a good thing, anyway. There was no way he'd still be alive if he had continued to live the way he lived when they were together, before he broke her heart. Was he still living? It didn't matter. Still, she was curious, and that was enough to carry her back, to 1995, to the gangster Adam days.

There was a scene flickering in her mind of Adam pulling up in his blue car, playing that gangster rap really loud, so that it was buzzing the car's chassis and throbbing her head. What kind of car was it? A Buick something… And, he had cut the suspension coils so that the car rested inches above the ground and every pebble in the road tossed you from your seat when the tire hit it. It was a blue car. It was sky blue. Under the passenger seat he kept a bb gun and a wooden baseball bat with large screws driven into it. It was his spiked bat; *for fucking people up.*

They used to drive around town, drunk, going to parties. Adam always started fights. The Painter remembered this one fight that broke out at a house party in Paradise Park. Later Adam dropped her off at home and asked her if she had any glass bottles lying around. She filled a plastic grocery bag with her father's empty beer bottles and before she had time to tie it up Adam had snatched it from her and was leaving the garage. The next day he told her that he torched the guy's house. She believed him. Now, The Painter was thinking that Adam was full of shit. She laughed again, this time startling herself when her voice echoed off of the empty walls of the basement studio. She looked behind. The studio was strange without her stuff. It felt colder, too. The Painter went to the windows, and though they were shut, she pushed once on each to make sure it was sealed.

Adam was full of shit. All men are full of shit. When she gets back to Hilo the men there will be full of shit, too. How embarrassing. A grown woman moving in with her parents. She thought she'd like to call Adam when she got back, if she could get his number.

*Ask Jesus to forgive your sins, always. Pray always. Get to know the Lord. Study and obey the Bible. Quit sinning. Escape Hell.*

When Adam won the Island Rumble belt that's what he said to the crowd. The Champ remembered how awkward it was. He was screaming all that Jesus stuff into the

mic. No one cheered. The university gym was silent. That's when people started to talk about how he was a psycho. It was after that. They were saying that Alameida made him go crazy. But, the Champ knew what really happened. The KO didn't make Adam become religious.

A few days before the fight with Alameida Adam got run over by a Datsun pickup. The Champ hadn't been there when it happened, but people from the gym who'd seen it said it was true. After training, Adam was crossing the street to his car and this primer red pickup comes from behind the hill and takes him out. They said the guy was going seventy or eighty in a thirty five. The Datsun got him head on and he flipped over the hood and smashed into the windshield. The Datsun drove away. Adam didn't break a bone.

A few days later he was in his car, waiting at an intersection, and the light turned green, but he didn't see it. The guy in back was getting pissed off. "Hey, don't you see the light?" he yelled, honking his horn.

That night, he was smoking weed with his chick, and he started thinking about about the Datsun, and about the guy behind him, earlier that day.

*Don't you see the light?*

After that, he wen't sober and kicked his chick out. Like, all of that psycho-ness that he had, it all went into religion.

“It is what it is?” the reporter asked The Champ. She squinted her eyes and propped her head with her hand, the pointer tapping at her chin. “What do you say to the critics out there, as your cardio seems to always be an issue, what do you say to those who say you don’t train hard enough, that you’re just not hungry anymore.

“People are going to talk,” The Champ said. “It is what it is.”

Adam stayed fighting, even after he won the belt and Island Rumble went under, and The Champ still cornered him, the way he always did. Only now, before entering the cage, Adam would open his Bible and read a random verse, and that was going to be the outcome of the fight. His first fight after he won the championship was in Dothan, Alabama, some promotion called the Dixie Fighting Champtionship. He was up against a Japanese fighter, a grappler named Tanaka. Going into the fight, everyone knew Tanaka was only looking to clinch with Adam and try to get the takedown. And, that’s what he did for three rounds. He took him down again and again, and ground out the win on points. When the judges announced the winner Adam dropped to his knees, shaking his arms violently in the air, looking off somewhere, up toward the lights and rafters. Like he was in a trance, tears going down his face, mumbling something that didn’t make sense.

“What are you doing?” The Champ asked. “Get up. Put you’re fucking hands in the air. Like a champion.”

“I’m sorry,” he was saying. “Sorry, Lord. Forgive me, Lord.”

“What are you apologizing for?”

Adam opened his eyes slowly.

"I jerked off today," he said. "I did it." He leaned forward until his forehead hit the mat. He sat up again and then blew snot from each nostril. "That's my punishment."

Adam barely trained for the fight, would miss days, or come to the gym hanging, stinking up the mats and bags with his alcohol sweat. He couldn't do three rounds of sparring, barely made it through two. Tanaka was a tough opponent who was known for his relentless pace and ability to break his opponents' will. Still, Adam was somehow going to knock out Tanaka in the first. He said it all through training camp. Going to knock his ass out, he'd say.

"When he shoots, I'll knock him out," he said one day during camp, refusing to finish the sprint drill. "The Lord already promised me."

But, no. Adam had no gas in the tank at the end of the first, and Tanaka, beating his chest on the other side of the ring, looked fresher coming out in round two than he had at the start.

"You see that!" Adam screamed. "You see it!" He stood beside the TV, pointing at the paused, video image of Tanaka on top, landing a right on Adam's chin. "It's right there," he said, tapping on the glass. "I told you."

It was a white flash, a light streak, maybe, that looked just like it was hovering over the shoulder of Tanaka as he sat, mounted on Adam, dropping a right that has slipped past Adam's guard and is landing on the jaw. If not a light streak, it was definitely a

crease on the cassette's magnetic tape. But, Adam swore that it was God's fist he was seeing in the flash of white. He showed where the knuckles were supposed to be, the angle of the thumb.

The Tanaka loss was the first of many to come. After that, Gustaffson knocked Adam out, cold, the way Alameida had, though it was an uppercut that got him this time. He was submitted by Roberts, an arm bar in the second. Then, a string of decision losses to younger, inexperienced fighters looking to get a name on their resume. At least he got in there, The Accountant was thinking. At least he'd had the balls to test himself, to measure what he was made of.

"I need you to pick up an onion from the store," The Accountant's wife said on the phone as he tossed his briefcase into the passenger seat and shut the door. "And, the girls say they're out of cereal, so go ahead and get that, too. Oat Flakes." He repeated back to her what she'd told him to get, then explained that he might be getting home late. Could they push dinner to eight?

"The gym? Here I was, thinking you had an appointment with your mistress," The Accountant's wife said. She was laughing in that squeaky tone of hers that reminded him of a mouse, or a rat. "Well, I can breathe easily again.'" He was going to see if he could put in 30 minutes on the treadmill. She laughed again, and he could have sworn that he could still hear her squeaking away on the other end of the line as he lowered the phone from his ear and hung up.

On the gym floor, The Accountant stood slouched beside the treadmill, tugging at the bottom hem of his shirt so that his gut wasn't exposed. Men and women in their twenties and thirties were breathing and sweating heavily, pushing and pulling on the ellipticals and free-weight stations in front of him, their bodies tight, responsive to the quick paces they'd set.

The treadmill belt began to move, and as The Accountant took his first steps, he increased the speed. Why couldn't he just stay in shape? Though, even if he were to get back in shape, his body would never look like it had in college. In the gym, when he used to train, the guys would compliment him on his frame, how it was so proportional, how it held his muscle mass well. The Accountant was jogging now, and was doing his best to ignore the pain in his knees. Two minutes and thirty six seconds had gone by in a workout set for twenty, and already The Accountant was having doubts about making it through.

The last time he saw Adam it had taken awhile for The Accountant to recognize him. It was downtown. The Accountant had just come from the realtor's office, where he'd gone to pick up his downpayment, one of the last items to settle before he headed home, to the mainland. Adam's long hair had been buzzed to centimeter length and he was wearing a wrinkled white suit. He was standing on the lawn at Kalakaua Park, encircled by a large group of bare-foot men and women who sat cross-legged. Crossing the street, toward the park, The Accountant couldn't hear what Adam was saying, but he heard the vocal inflections, the rises and drops in volume, the changes in cadence, and he saw the way waves of nodding passed over the listeners.

The Accountant watched from a distance for a few minutes, but left when the group stood and began to speak in tongues, shaking their bodies violently. Adam, his hand wrapped in a cast and held high above his head, clutched a tattered Bible and encouraged the listeners to fight the sin from their lives.

"And we know that all things work together for good," Adam said, "to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

The Accountant had wanted to say something to Adam that day in the park, would have liked to tell him how much he appreciated everything he did in the cage, for sacrificing his body for the benefit of others. But, he had never spoken with Adam before, not even at the gym, and as he walked away from the prayer circle on the lawn of Kalakaua park, he was already regretting that he hadn't, in the very least, told Adam that he'd seen all of his fights and that no one threw a more perfect hook.

It was a hook that won Adam the Island Rumble belt, and he had somehow become a Champion, like he always said he would. The Artist was tickled by the irony of it. When she and Adam were together it was obvious that he had some mental stability issues that far outweighed anything that he wanted to do. He could want to be someone, but he just wasn't capable of being the person he wanted to be. But, who was she to judge? She, The Artist, hadn't found much success in art.

She'd followed a guy to California, to live a life of creativity. Images of John and Yoko, bed-ridden to promote peace, often worked their way into her imagination, and some of her friends would even refer to her and the guy as John and Yoko. Her art was

mixed-media stuff. She liked collage work, too. After him, another guy that was a sculptor who worked in granite. Then there was the writer, who was probably the most pathetic of them all. Each new man, she was convinced, would give her something, teach her something new, show her a version of life she hadn't quite considered, a purer way of living. And, as she locked the door to the basement studio for the last time, she wondered if she would ever know anyone as pure as Adam Alvez.

When the Champ heard that Adam got busted for holding up an old lady, he gave him a call.

"It's tough times," Adam said. "The Lord said it was all right."

Shortly after that is when Adam went to prison for robbing a taxi driver. The Champ didn't know much about it, all he'd heard was that Adam was walking around Banyan Drive with a shotgun in his pants. A few years later, when Adam got out, The Champ flew back to Hilo to check on him. They trained, every day, for a week, and every day Adam was killing it. He still had that hook. He was still crazy as shit.

A few weeks later, after The Champ had returned to the mainland, he got a call from Adam.

"Hey man, I need some money, for a lawyer." He was calling from county lock up.

"What are you doing in there?" The Champ asked.

"I got seven charges, man." Kidnapping and some other stuff.

That was the last time The Champ spoke to Adam Alvez.

# THE MEETING

Bishop Kua needed to be back in time to catch the second half of the game, the last quarter, at least, so he scribbled through the paperwork in a way that would never have been possible a few years ago, when he'd first received the calling. The Lord's work was a cinch now. "Autopilot" came to mind as he stacked the finished paperwork and filed it in the corner cabinet. He would never have believed he could be done and out of the building early enough to catch most of this season's games.

He spent the first year of the five-year term anxious and afraid. Back then, he knew what the members were thinking, about his past, about his worthiness. But the Lord had called him to the position for a reason and so he worked hard to take care of the members and make sure they were on the path to celestial glory. By year three he sensed that he had earned their respect and support. It was unreal to see members in the aisles of Sack N Save or KTA and have them nod and smile and address him as Bishop.

With the paperwork done, he checked the calendar for member appointments. Just Brother Jenkins. Jenkins was an assembly line member, hot off the belt from Utah, probably pioneer stock. And like most of the Utah types Bishop Kua had known, Jenkins liked to voice his opinions on gospel matters, especially church protocol. When Salt Lake had handed down orders to do away with potlucks because of the strain it put on families with lesser incomes, Jenkins made a fuss over Bishop Kua's decision to ignore the First

Presidency. When the Prophet issued a statement about the caution with which members should approach online networking sites, Jenkins, after learning of Bishop Kua's Facebook profile through a co-worker, suggested that Bishop Kua take it down. In the end, Bishop Kua was always compliant. The potlucks ceased and the profile was deleted. He told himself that the next time Jenkins complained, he would be brave enough to tell him that this wasn't Utah, that it wasn't the mainland, that things here are done differently.

Bishop Kua scrambled to straighten his office. He pulled the sacrament cloth from the back of the chair, bunched it up, and tossed it into the file cabinet. Then he stacked the boxes of Gospel Doctrine study books and pushed them to the corner behind his desk. He wondered about the 49rs memorabilia, the Jerry Rice signed ball he'd picked up at the Pro Bowl, the red and gold curtains, the bobbleheads. These things made him feel insecure every time Jenkins came by the office. What about the Steve Young poster? That ratty poster had helped him through some overwhelming times. Innocent as he felt these things were, he knew that it was most likely something the First Presidency would frown upon. And though the other members seemed to like his office layout, Jenkins, as big a Steve Young fan as he claimed to be, said it was a bit "secular." Bishop Kua laughed to himself later that night, after having found "secular" in the dictionary. Jenkins, after all, had repeatedly refused church callings. He didn't want to teach Gospel Essentials class, he didn't want to serve as the Ward Mission Leader. He didn't even want to work in the library. He was always too busy.

With ten minutes to spare, Bishop Kua collapsed onto his chair, out of breath and sweaty. He reached for the AC remote and set it for the lowest temperature, and then returned it to the desk, beside his family photo. In it they're standing in front of the Salt Lake Temple, the three of them. Lots of teeth on him and his wife. No teeth for his son, though. The boy had perfected the closed mouth grin and it was rare to find a photo of him wearing any other expression. That trip to Salt Lake was the first trip he'd been able to take his family on. He'd taken out a loan with a high interest rate to pay for it, but it was an investment worth making. Bishop Kua felt like it was the perfect time for the trip, he having just returned to the church after nearly 15 years and also because his son was about to graduate from high school.

Bishop Kua breathed on the glass of the frame and wiped it with his tie. He thought about how much he missed his son but took comfort in the knowledge that the Lord has a plan and will take care of everything.

The door cracked and inched open, flooding the office with the noise of the after-church commotion from the hall. Jenkins's face appeared from behind the door, though his thick, reddish beard and light freckling across his nose and cheeks were peripheral to his aggressive, green eyes.

"Come in come in, sit down, sit down," Bishop Kua said. Jenkins opened the door wide and ducked under the threshold as he stepped into the office.

“Cheryl and Cassidy are here too,” Jenkins said.

Cheryl poked her head out from behind her husband’s shoulder. “Hi Bishop,” she said, untangling her daughter’s arms from her hair. Bishop Kua admired the way she took care of herself, unlike the local women who seemed to give up on themselves once they’d been married and even more so once they’d had their first child. She looked good, long and lean and fashionable.

Bishop Kua stood and squeezed between the desk and the wall. “Getting momona,” he said, slapping his belly and chuckling. “Need to go on one of those Hollywood diets… Hi Cheryl.” He kissed her on both cheeks and kissed Cassidy on the cheek that wasn’t slathered in Cheerio crumbs and saliva. He shook Jenkins’s hand with both hands and patted him on the back. “How’s the book?” Jenkins grinned and gave a thumbs-up. “Maika’i. Good to hear, good to hear.”

Bishop Kua ran through all the Bishop stuff expected of his position. “What’s new in the stars?” he said, hoping Jenkins wouldn’t answer with anything other than “good,” or “same ol.’” And when Jenkins did launch into talk about wind in space, Bishop Kua hunkered down and laced his fingers. He tried to follow Jenkins but gave up around the time he heard “kinetic” and “heliosphere” and instead, snuck glances at his watch, whose face was pulled around to the underside of his wrist. Second quarter by now, guaranteed.

“Good to hear things are going good,” he interrupted when Jenkins had paused to remember the name of a scientist who’d done something important. Bishop Kua reclined,

resting his hands in prayer position on the desk. “And not too bad getting all that money for your projects, yeah?”

“Well, it’s been a lot of work,” said Jenkins.

“Aren’t you lucky you had the Lord to help you out, though?” Bishop Kua said. He lowered his eyelids and bowed his head. “When we do the right things, the Lord blesses us. That’s a promise he’s made to us.” As he lifted his eyes he caught Jenkins glancing at his tattoo, the capital “K” he’d dug into the skin between his thumb and index finger with a sewing needle and pen ink during his apostate years. Bishop Kua rubbed his palms together steadily, and then lowered his hands to his lap. “How about you Cheryl, how’s mom life?”

Her focus was on Cassidy, who was restless, but she looked up to smile. She hushed her child and ran her fingers through the strip of Cassidy’s hair that stuck up, like the crest of a bulbul. “Everything’s fine, I guess. She can be a monster sometimes, but I knew what I was getting myself into.” Cassidy gurgled and bounced, jerking her arms in front of her. “Although it would be nice to get a little more help from this guy,” she said, tossing her head in the direction of her husband and laughing skittishly.

“Wait till she’s older,” Bishop Kua said. He remembered the work he’d had to put into his own son, how he had been a sensitive kid and how he would always cry about nothing. Trying to get him to do things he didn’t want to do was the worst. One morning, when his son was seven, he’d roughed him up a bit because he refused to go to school, ended up tossing him, half dressed, into the car, and dumping him, with one shoe, messy

hair and bawling, at the front gate. The school called later that day asking him this and that about his son, but he kept cool and talked his way out of it. “Wait till she gets older. Just like Cecilio and Kapono say, ‘The best is yet to come.’” Bishop Kua laughed alone at the reference. “So guys, what’s the scoop? How can I help you folks today?”

Jenkins scratched the back of his neck. He looked to his wife and paused. “Well, we’ve been having difficulty with our faith, to say the least.”

Bishop Kua felt numb in his fingertips and toes and he could feel his heart beating all over. Breathing was difficult. Jenkins was stalwart. He was the most righteous person Bishop Kua knew. “Are you praying?” he said with a Bishop’s smile, relaxed, assured.

“Can’t say I am,” Jenkins said.

“We haven’t had family prayers for some time, now,” said Cheryl.

Bishop Kua stopped smiling. “Are you reading your scriptures?”

“I thumb through the Bible once in awhile,” Jenkins said. “It is, after all, one of the most important texts in the history of Western Civilization.”

Western Civilization? “Listen,” Bishop Kua said, pulling a Book of Mormon from the drawer and setting it on the desk with the gold print on the cover facing the couple. “It starts with prayer. That’s how we talk to the Lord, yeah. But after that, it’s this,” he tapped the book, “that’s gonna show you the truth of this Gospel and make your faith real strong. It’s not like we get a testimony and then wait for celestial glory. We gotta work at it every day. It’s our kuleana.”

"Bishop, I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't speak to my wife and me like we're children. And about that book, there are many problems with the claims it makes, things that would never hold up under the scrutiny of what science and history have shown us to be true."

Jenkins went on to outline some of his doubts, talking about DNA studies and the lack of archaeological evidence, about how there were changes to the text since it was first published. He just kept coming with this and that till he was sitting erect, staring at Bishop Kua with those green eyes of his. Those eyes, made even more striking by his fair skin, put Bishop Kua on edge. They made him feel like an ant beneath a magnifying glass.

"I don't know about any of that stuff," Bishop Kua said, glancing past Jenkins to the Steve Young poster. "And sorry. I didn't want to make you folks mad. Just doing my job." He checked his wrist again but before he had registered the positions of the hands, Cheryl began sniffling. She was arched over, with her face pressed to the crown of Cassidy's head. Jenkins consoled his wife, massaging her shoulder. He kissed her. Cassidy stared at her own thumb before sticking it into her mouth. This one was going into overtime.

"Listen," Jenkins said. "Ultimately, and I guess there's no easy way to say this." He stopped massaging Cheryl and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ultimately, we came in today to tell you that we want our names to be removed from the church records. We no longer want any affiliation with the church."

*Ultimately. Affiliation. Scrutiny.* Only Ha'oles talked like that. Who did this guy think he was? Just say what you want to say, that you don't want to be a member anymore. Words like that were part of the reason for his faith issues. Words like that made people think they were smarter, better, higher.

"To be honest, I've been dealing with this for a long time," Jenkins continued. "But I still came to church, tried to be a better member. I worked harder to do exactly what God wanted, thinking he'd strengthen me. Then we came here and I saw the looseness of everything, that *whatever* attitude, and I kept thinking to myself: How can these people end up in the same place I'm going."

"'These people?'" Bishop Kua said, raising his voice. "Who's 'these people?'"

"I don't mean it like that," Jenkins said. "It just raised questions in my mind about uniformity and structure, about truth being fixed and God and how –"

"And what, you too, Cheryl?" Bishop Kua interrupted.

She said nothing.

"I want to tell you folks something," Bishop Kua said. "It's not here," and he jabbed his finger to his temple, "that's gonna save you now and after."

"Just forget what I said –"

"Let me talk, yeah!" Bishop Kua pulled together his courage and stared into Tom's olivine eyes. He tried to relax and after a few slow, deep breaths, continued. "I used to know a guy, Papa Chang. He was real old style. Simple. He used to live in Lanakila

Housing with his wife, Donna, who I never heard talk, not even once. She was a little bit slow, but had a good spirit. Just to give you an idea of the kind of man Papa Chang was, he told me he loved her cause no one else would. Before him, she lived with her family and they would always kick her around. But that's another story. I want to tell you about Papa Chang. The guy couldn't read. Like I said, he was old style, grew up in Kalapana, never needed to know how to read. I asked him one day, Papa Chang, how is your faith so strong and you can't even read the words God has given us. The guy, he only laughed. And he had a real rough laugh too, like he had a pound of cinder in his throat. He told me, 'Why I gotta read when all I gotta do is listen. Those two Ha'ole boys who knocked on my door the first time, when they found out I couldn't read, told me all I had to do was keep my ears and heart open. So I been keeping my ears and heart open this whole time and the Lord never stopped talking.' Till then, I never felt the spirit so strong in my life." Bishop Kua rubbed the tattoo. "You should have seen me at his funeral, crying like a baby."

Cheryl squeezed Cassidy against her chest.

"He sounds like he was an amazing man," said Jenkins. "But I think you're still misunderstanding us. We don't –"

"Why? Cause you too smart, yeah Tom. But you nothing, just prideful. That's all you are, prideful, with nothing to back you up. And your family is suffering for it."

Tom sneered and threw his arms into the air. "Didn't I tell you he would say that, Hon. Too prideful. Isn't that just a bit trite? You want to talk about pride? Don't think I

don't know about you, Bishop, I know a lot. So for you to sit there with that self-righteous attitude, just because you have an office, now, is insulting." Cheryl put her hand on her husband's thigh but Jenkins swept it away. "How can you do what's right for my family when you couldn't do what was right for yours?"

Bishop Kua leaned forward and stuck his finger out at Tom. In a steady voice he said, "You guys are all the same. You come here and you think you know… You try for tell us how for do things…" He stopped. He knew what would happen if he'd went further. He just needed time to think, to collect himself. Everyone knew about him and his family. It was a small town. It wasn't his fault that he didn't know where his son was or if he was OK. Only God knows these things. And it wasn't as if he didn't love his son. That's why he was so hard on him, cause he loved him too much. He loved his son. He loved him too much.

And as he searched for something to say, the murmur outside caught his ear. The voices of two women laughing just on the other side of the door. More voices further away. Running footsteps that trembled the floor as they drew near then trailed off and disappeared. He heard children yelling at each other, playfully, then all at once take off down the hall, like a panic of sheep. It was difficult to imagine the afterlife, but when he felt sufficiently creative, Bishop Kua saw it being something like the way it was after church. Everyone was a better version of themselves after the benediction, as the closing organ piece drawled behind the swish of polyester, the zips of scripture cases and the beginnings of chitchat. He often tried to imagine what the better version of his son would look like, then. He just couldn't see it. Why couldn't he see him?

"I don't have anything else to say to you folks. You're hearts are too hardened. But I ask you to think about your family." Bishop Kua pinched the tattoo until he felt the initial sting begin to dull.

"Bishop –"

"We're tired," Cheryl interrupted. "And we've decided that this is best for our family."

When he felt ready, Bishop Kua lifted his eyes and managed to smile at Cheryl, who was holding Cassidy by the armpits. Cassidy's gaze darted around the office, from one thing to another, impressed by everything she laid her eyes on. She hummed and buzzed in a language that landed lightly on Bishop Kua's ears and he was suddenly overcome by a sadness that was large and thick, like pahoehoe creeping through his body, distending and filling the cracks inside him. "I strongly counsel you to go home tonight and really ask God about the decision you're making."

"I don' think that will be necessary," Cheryl said. Her eyes were still red and glassy. "All we've known is this Church. But Tom and I feel that there is more out there and we want to give our daughter more than what can be offered here. I stand by my husband. He is the patriarch of our household and I trust him. And he trusts me."

Bishop Kua tossed the Jerry Rice ball and the bobbleheads onto the back seat. He flagged down a barefoot boy wearing a white shirt and tie and handed him the Steve

Young poster. The boy smiled, rolled it up and sprinted toward the chapel, using it as a sword against the phalanx of hibiscus bushes lining the walkway.

Sitting in his car, Bishop Kua watched a man who had left the chapel service to deal with his screaming son. He was now pacing back and forth in front of the chapel doors. The red-faced child bawled and squirmed in the man's sturdy grip, sometimes freeing his arms and pulling at the man's clasped hands and clawing at the man's face. He wrenched and fought. He bawled some more. But the man held the boy firmly, in a way that seemed to cost him no effort. And when the boy's strength lessened, the man brought his face to his son's, dodging the tiny, flailing arms and leaning in close, whispering something and kissing him on the forehead.

Bishop Kua turned the ignition. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve and looked to make sure no one had seen him. A strange sound was trying to leave him, a sound he was afraid to let go. And when a portion of the sound slipped through his lips, he covered his mouth with both hands. He slumped low in his seat and waited for it to pass. It would pass, eventually. When he felt confident enough, he uncovered his mouth and sat up, wiping his eyes, and checked his face in the rearview. He reached for the seatbelt and brought the buckle across his chest but stopped short to watch the man and his son at the chapel doors. The boy's eyes were closed now and he rested his face against his father's chest. Bishop Kua let the belt go and shifted the car into gear.

# CUSTODY

In the check out line of Walmart, Jodi Curtis watched a large woman slide an EBT card through the machine. As the cashier punched buttons on the keyboard to finish the transaction, the woman used angry glares and mouthed threats to collect her six kids, who had wandered from the cart and were now cussing, hitting each other and jostling customers. The kids disregarded their mother and she seemed to disregard any hope of taking control of the situation. She looked tired. The skin was purple around her sunken eyes. She took the EBT card from the cashier and returned it to her pocket, lazily, hunched over, like she barely had the strength to lift her arms.

Jodi smiled. She watched the woman bag her groceries and smiled even bigger, hoping the woman might catch her glimmering smile out of the corner of her eye and look up, and smile back, and they'd have that moment of connection; they'd console each other. When the woman had placed the last of her bags into the cart and told her kids that they were gonna get lickens when they got home, she glanced back and saw Jodi, who was still smiling. But she didn't return the gesture. "What? Get problem?" she said. The woman made a face that Jodi interpreted to be one of contempt. Jodi, still smiling, looked away, toward the cashier, but she could still feel the woman glaring at her. Finally the woman turned away and headed toward the exit.

Jodi tried to get past the strange encounter, but she couldn't help but feel something like betrayal. She told herself that the woman probably had many things in her life that angered her and that she happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, that it had nothing to do with her fair skin and blonde hair. It was definitely not the skin and hair. Definitely not. It's got nothing to do with you. You're part of the problem if you allow yourself to think this way. She might have gone on this way if it wasn't for the beep of the pricing laser freeing her from the pummeling going on in her head.

The conveyor belt pulled the goods in a steady, rumbling rhythm, starts and stops. Jodi watched as each item passed. Milk. Bread. Cold cuts. Juice. Cookies for Jamie's school snack. Toilet bowl cleaner. Bill's socks. Bill's disposable razors, the triple bladed ones. Anna's notebooks for school, all of them pink. Anna's pencils for school, #2. Bill's deodorant stick, mountain breeze scent. Black dress for Jamie's recital. Shampoo. Soap. Toilet paper, quilted. A book entitled, "Get Your Child Into Harvard: Tips and Strategies." Another book entitled, "Reading & Writing Skills For The Prospective College Student," for Keola. He probably wouldn't read it but he'd understand the good intentions.

The last item on the belt was a home pregnancy test. The cashier passed it over the laser but Jodi stopped her before she could total everything. "Let's leave this one out, OK," she said. The cashier punched in some numbers on the keyboard and passed it over the laser once more. "I'm sorry," Jodi said. "Making you go through all this trouble. I'll

put it back on the shelf. Sorry." The cashier smiled and waved her off. She said not to worry about it and gave Jodi the cost.

Jodi and Keola were finally on the road. They'd finished the shopping. They'd made it through the prepping and the packing. They'd dropped the twins off at Jodi's sister's house in Kaumana. Now they were approaching Pu'uhuluhulu, on their way to Kona on Saddle Rd.

You stupid, Keola's mother had said. You just like your father, stupid and lazy.

Maybe Keola had forgotten to the lock the front door when he left to see his friends, or he'd needed to have his mother sign yet another test he'd failed. If it wasn't one thing it was another. He was lazy from as far back as he could remember, never picking up his toys from the living room floor after he'd finished playing with them, lazy because it took his mother several instances of asking, each louder and angrier than the last, before he'd actually get to doing what it was she was asking.

You lazy fuck, his mother would scream, calling him this and that. Do something!

He was stupid because he didn't always understand things the way they were supposed to be understood and like his laziness, he couldn't remember a time when he was anything other than that. He'd never done well in school, but no one he knew did. It was always the Japanese kids or the Ha'ole kids that raised their hands and answered. But, Keola didn't equate his poor performance in school with his stupidity. He was stupid

because he often didn't get jokes. *How do you get a one-arm Portuguese out of one tree? You wave at him*. How the one-arm Portuguese get up the tree, anyway? He was stupid because he couldn't follow directions.

What, you no get ears? his mother would say. I told you! Pick up the damn coins off the ground before you vacuum! You such a dummy, she would say. Just like your father.

He was seventeen now, seventeen and as lazy and stupid as he'd ever been. Seventeen. Same age as his father when Keola had been born. Same age as his mother, too. The thought made him uneasy because it was only a few years later that his father, 21 years old, went to Halawa for manslaughter. Something to do with chicken fighting.

Jodi, in the driver's seat with hands at ten and two, glanced down at the volume knob of the stereo. The heavy bass of a song that was indistinguishable from other songs was starting to give her a headache.Where had good music gone, stuff like Journey and Stix? She turned the knob, lowering the volume until only the sound of the engine and the revving of the tires against the road could be heard, then glanced over at Keola, who was half relined in his seat and staring out the window. Then, she lifted the volume just a little bit, in case he liked the boom, booming that so many kids his age seemed to look for in music.

Let's talk about something, she said, trading glances between the road ahead and Keola, who seemed to be in his own world. The trip will go by much faster if we talk. Or play a game! Let's play a game!

She was a cheerful and animated woman whose energy seemed to contradict the graying hair around her ears and the areas of her face – along her jawline and under her chin and beneath her eyes – where the skin was more flaccid. Her vigor could be seen in her manner of dress. She often gave silent gratitude to God and her genes for having blessed her with a small, twiggy frame that had protected her from sagging breasts and bloated thighs throughout the years, and she dressed in ways that showed off the aspects of her that were youthful. Even now, as she tried to think of a game that would be fun for both her and Keola to play, she fiddled with a gold penBillt that hung down to a point just above where her cleavage began, a cleavage pronounced by a pushup bra and the low neckline of her tank top. She often thought about how desirable she was in comparison to other women her age. How desirable she was as woman. You have twin girls? No way! This was the general reaction to her telling strangers about her family

Let's play, *Have You Ever?,* Jodi said.

Keola had never heard of *Have You Ever?* He knew there were questions.. But, what about the rules? Were there point systems and penalties? Could you ask any kind of question? Have you ever died? That question could never come up, no one would ask it. Still, it made Keola uneasy to think that without rules to prevent stupid stuff – rules that potentially could be long and hard to understand, rules that, even after being laid out and taken in would be forgotten or half remembered, or confused with others – the game couldn't ever be fun. Besides, there were lots of things he had never done. The game would be boring. Just boring and stupid. Keola shifted in the seat so that he was facing Jodi and smiled in a way that was invisible. He was smiling, he knew that he was, but it

didn't feel like anything, he couldn't feel his lips or the muscles around his mouth. It feels invisible, my mouth, he thought.

Oh, never mind, I think we need more people to play that one, Jodi said. Let's see, what else is there?

Jodi Curtis, who had at one time been Jodi Straight, often thought about the Jodi she was before. Curtis had become her name when she married Bill Curtis. She was twenty one, then. And though she couldn't distinguish, exactly, this Jodi from that one, was far from being able to talk about the experience in any other way but to say, It's just different, there were large portions of her that liked Jodi Straight more than Jodi Curtis. She might have used words like playful or fun if she were pressed to explain, though, in the past she'd never allow herself to get to that point. Playful. She liked the way that sounded. Spending time with Keola, just the two of them, brought it out of her, that playfulness. He made her feel fun, connected to something in motion and unpredictable. She didn't want to lose that, whatever it was, this feeling. She didn't want to go back to feeling the way she felt before Protective Services placed Keola with her family.

You're the sun in my life, Bill Curtis had said. I'd be blind, otherwise. That's what he said just before proposing and it was the most beautiful thing Jodi had heard. Like poetry, or something. Beautiful and romantic. Yes, of course, she said, without any hesitation. She wrapped her hands around the back of Bill's head and pulled him in until their lips were mashed together and she tried to kiss him in a way that came from the tips of her toes. She started to cry.

Wow, baby, Bill said, dabbing her tears with his fingertips. You want to get married. Sometimes I thought you didn't want to. Sometimes it was hard to tell. Are you sure you want to get married? It hasn't been very long.

Jodi was sure. It's what she'd wanted more than anything. The idea had filled her mind long ago, and never had she felt as safe and secure as she did in that moment. Bill Curtis would take care of her. He wanted to take care of her.

I'm going to make you so happy, she said. Everything will be amazing. I'll never hurt you, so please, don't hurt me.

Jodi was remembering the night of the proposal as she sped over the dips and humps and around the corners of Saddle Rd, going sixty-plus where the signs were marked forty-five. It's not that she hadn't meant what she said to Bill that night. She meant it all. She still meant it.

Please, don't hurt me, she said aloud, finding some humor in it now and laughing to herself.

Keola had taken off his sunglasses and was polishing the thick, white frame and opaque, plastic lenses with the bottom edge of his shirt. He ran the fabric over the sharp angles of the rims, scrubbed the sweat from the nose pads and then wiped the length of the temple pieces. They were bulky and cool. If Keola happened to catch himself in a mirror or the reflection of a window while wearing the glasses, he was immediately reminded of an insect, one of the more violent ones, a wasp. And, though he didn't surf, he knew that if he were wearing the glasses, people would think he did, which he liked.

And, if they asked him where he surfed, he would never say Honoli'i, because everyone who surfed there knew everyone else who surfed there. It was easier just to make up spots. You know Poho'iki? Not there, but a little bit down, toward Hilo side. I go there, he'd say. Jodi's glasses, like Keola's, were bulky and made her look like and insect, too. She looked like a fly. The frames were pink, exaggerated, and the lenses were large, reflective discs that bowed and curved Keola's face whenever he looked into them. They were rock star glasses, the ones pretty girls at school wore, girls that were cool and hot and knew how to have a good time, or so Keola thought.

Hurt you? Keola said, putting his sunglasses back on.

Yes, Keola. You frighten me. I'll do anything! Just, please, don't hurt me! Jodi laughed and hit the top of the steering wheel repeatedly.

After twelve years of marriage, Bill Curtis had shown himself to be a toothless man, unwilling to fight when it was time to fight. He was out of the house most of the time, flying the HNL to JFK route. Jodi was convinced that this was a tactic, an alibi that kept him from ever having to deal with conflicts at home, big and small. Sometimes, to show him how she felt, she'd hand him the twins as soon as he walked in the door. Wouldn't say anything. Just hand him the kids, say, You deal with them, and lock herself in the room.

Just messin', Jodi said when she realized that Keola wasn't laughing. I know, I know, not funny. Why are you so anti, today?

He wasn't being anti. He just felt funny. Almost sick. He was on new medication and sometimes it takes awhile to adjust to the how it's supposed to feel when it starts working. That's what the doctor and case worker said from the very beginning, when he first had to start taking them, and it was true. He might have to be on this one for a time and if that one didn't work then they'd try another one, or if that one works but it gives you side effects, like you can't sleep, or something, then I can give you one to help out with that, the doctor said. He often thought about how the medication might have kept him from fighting with his mother all those years. Maybe if he was taking pills when he was thirteen they wouldn't have had that fight, and he wouldn't have pushed his mother and said she was a good-for-nothing bitch, and maybe she wouldn't have gotten so angry. Then she wouldn't go walking down Puainako Street, trying to jump in front of cars, all crying and yelling, even though he said he was sorry for pushing her.

I just feel little bit funny, Keola said.

Is it the medication?

I don't know. I think so, he said, holding out his hand to block the sun.

Jodi rubbed Keola's thigh and kissed him on the cheek and assured him that he'd feel much better once they were in the hotel room. You sure it's not because you're thinking about that Maldonado girl that's making you sick? That would make me sick.

Keola covered his face with his hands and shook his head. You don't even know what you talking about, he said.

It was the new medication that was making him sick, but after he got used to it he'd be OK. Maybe if he had started taking the medication when he was younger he'd be smarter and he wouldn't have been lazy and then he'd still be with his mother. The case worker told him this when he first got into the system and it was one of the few things that made sense. It made sense because he probably would have been calmer back then. Like when he was in his first placement and the Dad, John or James, whatever the guy's name was, only made cheese sandwiches for him but gave his real kids good stuff, like chocolate pudding, and Keola said the guy was a faggot because he'd always come into the bathroom while Keola was showering, acting like he needed something in there. He said, Give me that food, faggot, but didn't get all nuts, the way he used to, when his mother would get on his case. He didn't throw nothing, didn't hit nobody. If he wasn't on pills, guaranteed he would have scrapped John right there, or James. Still, the dad was pissed and Keola was back in the Boy's Home after a little over a month with that family. Then it was another family for six months and one after that for four. In and out of different homes throughout high school, many family's deciding to return him because they thought he was too old. More often he was returned because families, as Keola understood it, only wanted to take in a kid for the money and not because of love. He had argued and been bad with all of the families, but he hadn't touched anyone, didn't get all nuts and this made him hopeful.

Do you know what Bill said to me the other night? Jodi was gaining on a pickup truck and checking the rearview mirror and blind spots. He told me last month's electric bill is too high. Jodi jerked out into the opposite lane, sped up until she was parallel to the

pickup. It was then that she saw the roof of a white car disappear behind an approaching ridge, then appear again, bigger, closer, clearer, a Civic, before disappearing again into a dip. Fuck. Jodi's tires screeched and the pickup shot off ahead. She yanked the wheel to bring the minivan back into its proper lane, pounded on the horn, and lifted her shoulders and hands when the Civic shot past them. Assholes, Jodi said. Anyway, what does he care, he's never home, anyway.

Bill Curtis was a nice man. That was the problem, as Jodi saw it. It's hard to respect a man like that. What kind of man would agree to becoming a foster care provider, just because his wife thinks it will make their family stronger? A weak man would. A weak man would do something like that. Just because he doesn't have the balls to tell his wife no, cause he's too stupid to understand what she was really trying to tell him. This is why she was leaving Bill Curtis. When Keola turned eighteen she would leave Bill Curtis.

You see, this is the kind of stuff I'm talking about, Jodi said to Keola. They were coming over the ridge, running the cratered road toward the ocean. It glinted from miles away and an easterly wind was capping the waves, speckling the entire ocean with white. The electricity bill is just one example. He thinks he controls me. Jodi pumped the brake and squeezed on the wheel to steady it. Can you blame me?

Keola didn't answer, leaving the question hanging in the air, up for grabs should either of them decide to take it on.

No more skipping school, Jodi said, running her hands through Keola's thick, wavy hair. I mean it. You already have too many absences and at this rate, you'll be going to Saturday school for the rest of your senior year. She gave him a look to let him know that she was serious, then pinched his ear. He jerked and nodded, rolling his eyes.

Yup, he said. Keola got up from the bed and snatched the TV remote from the dresser. He stood at the foot of the bed, flipping through channels. No more no good shows on now. Only Soaps. He settled on *The Price Is Right*.

Jodi watched him. He stood with his hands on his hips, in a pose that reminded her of an 18th Century painting of a European aristocrat. She got lost in the lines of his back, the perfectly toned musculature, from his broad shoulders all the way down to his tiny waistline. She loved the two dimples that straddled the spine on his lower back.

Keola returned to the bed. As he slipped under the covers, Jodi slid in close to him, stretching one arm over the top of his head and with the other she reached down and stroked his cock. He'd be ready to go again in a few minutes. He was young.

When's the prom? Jodi said, slowing her motions, making her touch more slight. It's coming up soon, right, next month? Have you asked anyone?

I don't know. Keola exhaled long and slow. He closed his eyes.

It's important. One of those things you'll remember for the rest of your life.

Yup.

Jodi pushed her pelvis up against his hip, grinding it against him in an oblong motion. She kissed the raised scar on his his shoulder.

Maybe I can find someone for you, she said, giggling.

Maybe. Keola licked his bottom lip. His breath was becoming shallow.

You need a girlfriend, Jodi whispered. You're too young not to have one.

When they had finished and Keola had gone to shower, Jodi laid back and touched the tender spots on her neck where his hands had been wrapped. Her chest still heaved and she felt as if she would suffocate. She turned on her side and brought her legs up to her chest. She sucked and chewed on the tip of her thumb. She moaned and felt her eyes begin to water. She wanted to tell him stuff. She wanted to say I love you and I want to be with you and I want us to take care of this baby together.

I feel like you've been distant, lately, Jodi said. She took a bite of salad and looked around the patio. It was filled with older couples, silvery people enjoying the Tahitian drumming and dancing on stage. She swallowed and took a sip of water. You know, like, it's like you've been far away, I can tell. Jodi watched Keola as he ripped a large piece from his margaritte pizza and stuffed it into his mouth. Are you even listening to what I'm saying, she said. And, I'm not just talking about the medication, either. This thing I'm talking about started a couple weeks ago.

The audience began to applaud. Some people cheered and whistled as the bare-stomached Billcers left the stage and the MC returned to the microphone. The MC said, Let's give the lovely ladies one more round of applause. Now, up next, we have–

You crazy, Jodi, Keola said. I don't know what you talking about.

A thick man, greased and in a loin cloth, took the stage. He yelled out in Samoan.

OK, OK, fine. You don't trust me, do you, Jodi said.

I trust you.

How long have you been living in our house now?

The greased man touched the wraps at both ends of his staff to the flame of a tiki torch, then he rolled it in his hand and watched the flame soak the shreds of cloth.

I trust you, Keola said.

I've been good to you, right? My family's been good to you.

Never mind.

Never mind, what?

Nothing.

No, never mind, what?

A woman on the table next to them put her hand on her husband's shoulder and placed the other one on her chest as she watched the fire dancer spin a ring of fire feet from her face.

Just, never mind.

Did you want to tell me something?

No.

Then, why'd you say never mind? It's like you had something you wanted to say but didn't. Are you scared of me? Are you weak? Because I never thought of you as the weak type.

No. I meant never mind all this.

Why are you so afraid to talk about it?

I'm not afraid. I just know you'll get all pissed if I tell you.

So, there is something you want to tell me.

Jodi leaned forwad and folded her arms on the table. The fire Billcer was hooting and chanting. He threw the staff twenty feet into the air and when it came down he caught it behind his back. The audience gasped and cheered.

Keola wouldn't look at her. There was a moment when it seemed like he would say something. In the end, he said they'd talk about it later, then he turned around to watch the final seconds of the fire dancer's performance.

Jodi kept cool throughout the night. She waited until they were back in their hotel room to say something.

Are you fucking stupid! Jodi took off her sweater and threw it at Keola as he came out of the bathroom. It hit him in the face and he let it fall to the floor. Don't you ever disrespect me the way you did tonight!

I just never like talk about it then, you know. I wanted to watch the show.

Bullshit! And pick up your shit! Look at it all over the floor over there! You're probably pissing off the cleaning lady. Look at it!

Keola picked up the shirts and socks and pants that were laying around his open duffle bag. Sorry, he said as he stuffed them back into the bag.

Not like that! Jodi screamed. Fold them. Don't be sloppy.

I'll fold it later. Keola said, calmly. He threw the duffle bag across the room, knocking over the lamp. He stared at Jodi. Both his fists were clenched and he was bouncing on his toes, rolling his shoulders and moving his head to some kind of scary rhythm.

Jodi backed away. She sat down on the bed and put her head in her hands.

I need money, Keola said.

Have I ever said no to you? What? Do you want some new video games? What? Some, what, pakalolo? So you can get high with your friends down at Kalakaua Park?

No. I need a tux.

What? What are you talking about? For... Who are you taking?

No worries.

Jodi stood up, slowly, and walked to the dresser. She grabbed her keys, wallet, and the room key, and told Keola she needed time to be alone, said she was going to take a walk down by the water. I'll be back, she said. She shut the door and walked down the hallway, took the elevator to the lobby, passed the front desk and left through the automatic, glass doors. Jodi Curtis walked through the Japanese garden, down the stairs, through the parking lot, to her minivan. As she pulled out of the parking lot and got onto the main highway she felt like she could do anything and be anyone. Everything goes forward, she thought. She could go to Kohala right now, or Ka'u, or even out to Paradise Park, right now. Just go. It was all one road, anyway. She could go to all of them, if she wanted to. Circle the island. But after that, what? If she stayed on that road she'd eventually end up back home, in Hilo.

## SLOW, QUICK, QUICK

Russell Takata felt like rubbish. Here he was again, in the morning dark, only underwear, slouching toward the glow of the computer monitor, headphones on, a glazed look on his face. Pornography had never interested Russell through most of his life. He'd seen it, in magazines, on VHS tapes, on decks of cards. He had always liked seeing it. But, it was different now. It was becoming a habit. He only watched; he liked the amateur videos most of all, the ones users would submit to the site for others to rate and comment on.

It had been months since he and his wife had that blow up over his early morning habit. After things had settled down and they'd been able to talk about it in a relaxed way, Russell decided to remove this infected part of his personality. The computer stays off unless other people are in the room, Russell said one night at dinner. The next day he made a sign out of red and yellow construction paper and taped it to the upper bezel of the monitor. On it a cartoon computer display was holding a finger to its head and enclosed in a bubble that tapered toward the cartoon's mouth it said, *Remember the Rule*.

Russell was looking at the sign now, at the exaggerated, open-mouthed smile of the clipart image, at the buck teeth, the thick lips, fat tongue, and he followed the tail of the word bubble as its lines split and diverged, all the way up, until he came to

the message. He read it to himself, then looked down at the video playing on the screen.

After periods of trying different kinds of videos, Russell had settled on something he liked, something that was his. He liked watching masturbation videos. He especially liked to watch masturbation videos of men in their early twenties, nude and alone in their bedrooms and home offices and dorms.

Russell even had a favorite user. His name was D0rMb0I88. His videos didn't have as many views as those posted by more popular users. From what Russell could tell D0rMb0I88 was a muscled young man with blonde hair and a mediocre penis, who lived in a room that had blue walls and a ceiling fan. He was handsome. Russell felt envious of D0rMb0I88's youth and energy. Somehow, he looked stronger and more handsome in the video playing now. Russell guessed it was because D0rMb0I88 had let his beard grow out since the last post. When the video stopped at four minutes and twenty six seconds Russell took off his headphones and sat in the quiet. He heard his wife coughing in their bedroom, so he turned off the computer and told himself that this was the last time.

There was too much pressure, though Russell didn't understand why he felt this way. His eldest daughter Stephanie had recently married a *Nihonjin* who came from an upper middle class Kyoto family. They were living in Japan now. Russell's son, Ian, was in his first year at Seattle University, studying business management, and had recently taken up weight lifting. It had only been a few months, but in photos emailed home Russell already noticed the broadening of Ian's shoulders and the bulking of his forearms. It made him proud. His youngest daughter, Nikki, was a sophomore at Waiakea High.

She was more fun-loving than the first two, had a thing for short skirts and makeup, but stayed on task with her studies. She wanted to go to USC to study whatever. She was cute.

And, there was his wife, Lorrie. She was beautiful. Not so much physically beautiful, as she always had a tomboyish quality to her. She kept her hair short and cropped and rarely wore anything Russell would consider sexy. She was homely, or regular, as he may have put it. But, she knew how to care for the family. It was Lorrie who got Russell his job; she talked to her cousin Stanley who was the administrator of the county parks and recreation department, and the following month Russell was managing the Waiakea Uka Gym. When Stephanie needed a summer job Lorrie went to a high school friend who'd become a real estate lawyer; Stephanie spent July and August of her junior/sophomore summer filing and retrieving records for Tzukazaki Kobayashi & Ball. Lorrie knew what everyone needed and was always able to do something about it. Even after spending nine to ten hours in her classroom at Keaau Middle School with students widely considered to be some of the worst in the district, Lorrie still came home and cleaned up the house, and made dinner, and talked about her day and everyone else's, as well.

Russell knew how much they needed Lorrie and did his best not to take her for granted. It frightened him to imagine his life without her and he had never felt so frightened as the night they'd had that blow up. He just wasn't thinking. If he'd been thinking he would have remembered to clear the browser cache and history. He would have come up with a better excuse. If he'd been thinking he'd have known better than to

use the family's computer. But, where else could he have done it? Work? Why did he even have to do it?

"I need to talk to you," Lorrie had said the night of the blow up. She was at the sink washing dishes, letting the faucet run. The hot water against the basin sent steam clouds into the air that condensed and beaded on her red face.

"You're wasting water," he said.

Lorrie dug through the mess of dishes. She dropped the larger pieces into the adjacent sink; the pots and pans rang like gongs as they hit the bottom of the basin. The scraping of silverware and the sharp pinging of the ceramic plates and mugs against each other hurt Russell's ears.

"Trying to clean them or break them?"

Lorrie didn't say anything. She stopped and shook her head, and as Russell approached to embrace her he thought she looked more tired than ever before. The sweat, the blotchy skin, the emptiness in the eyes, the hunched posture, it was unattractive.

"Just kidding," he said, pulling her in close and squeezing her tightly.

"You're sick."

"Me? Why? Where are you going?"

Lorrie flung the dish towel into the sink, then left the kitchen and went into the living room. She called for Russell and he followed.

"What's this garbage?" she said, stepping away from the computer and crossing her arms over her chest.

Russell couldn't see clearly without his glasses so he squinted his eyes and leaned toward the screen, until everything came into focus. What he saw he recognized immediately.

"What's this fi…" It was as if Lorrie was afraid, even, to mouth the words to explain. "…Filth. Crap…" She extended both arms, gesturing stiffly toward the screen, then pulled back and folded them across her chest. She raised her hand to her cheek and cupped the side of her face. She shifted her body. Rolled her shoulders. Let her head fall to the right and then to the left.

"What's this?" Russell said. He was still hunched over, squinting in front of the screen.

"You're sick."

"You think this is… I like this kind of shit?" Russell waited till he'd finished his sentence before looking at Lorrie. And, when he did, saw the way her eyes were, his immediate reaction was to turn away, to close the browser, to stop the video of a young, bare-skinned man alone in his dorm room.

"Don't you close it! Put it back up!"

"I don't know how this got here."

"Jesus… Just find it again!"

"Maybe it was Nikki."

"Do you…" Lorrie put out her hand and motioned with flicks of her wrist, as if sweeping away the computer and, with it, the young man on the screen. "…Do this?"

Lorrie went to their room and slammed the door. She refused to speak to Russell for most of the week, keeping conversation to work or bills or errands, and only when Nikki was around the house. The following Sunday Russell knocked on the door, as he'd been doing every day, once in the morning and again at night. It was almost midnight and he just wanted to let her know that he was going to bed and that he loved her. He'd be ready to talk whenever she was ready. He was sorry. He'd be waiting until she was ready.

"I don't know why I like those videos."

"That's disgusting… I'm sorry. I don't mean that."

"I never did nothing. Never… with a–"

"Good."

"I'm not like that. Just like to watch. So, I'm not–"

"Of course you aren't."

“I don’t know why I’m like this.”

“Just don’t do it anymore.”

“I want to be regular.”

“I know.”

Russell Takata still felt like rubbish. He hadn’t been able to stop. It was now an early evening habit, in front of the office computer, after he’d locked up the gym and was alone. When the last of the basketball mothers had finally picked up their kids from practice, or the volleyball women, now finished with their afternoon pick-up game, stood in circles and talked in the parking lot, Russell would sweep the gym with a dusty push broom and oil the court. He’d lock the front and back doors, then return to his office, to his desk, his chair,where he spent most of the workday. People would come and go; if they needed a ball or a racket, or anything, Russell would get up from his desk, make them sign the sheet, then grab from the equipment closet, or pull from the rack on the wall, or find in the bin behind his desk, whatever sports equipment they needed. Then, he’d go back to emailing and commenting on pictures and watching videos.

Wednesdays were different. He kept the gym open an hour later for his dance class and didn’t have time for his habit. Sometimes he didn’t even think about it. Instead he’d go over the steps he’d be teaching his students later that night, and try to think of

ways to explain the techniques so that they'd better understand them. Imagine you are dancing with a lover you never seen in years. Feel the touch. Hurt, yeah? Now, try imagine the lover's parents are watching you, and they don't like you. Slow, but with plenty emotion. No, not plenty emotion. Not like that. Like a pot that's going to overflow and spill all over.

Russell wrote it down on a post-it note: *lovers*, *long time no see*, *touch*, *hurt*, *parents pissed*, then, *O-V-E-R-F-L-O-W*, all in capitals, sounding each letter as he wrote. He stood in the ready position. He made small steps in the cramped space between his desk and the stable-style door of the office, the soles of his shoes scraping across the dusty floor, his lips mouthing the beats as he leaned and twisted, spun and postured: slow, quick, quick… He danced in circles to a Bolero tune playing on repeat in his head, missing the edge of the desk by inches, the hem of his shirt grazing the corner of the equipment cabinet with each pass. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back, trusting that he knew the steps and the distance well enough not to break anything or bruise himself: slow, quick, quick… slow.

Russell danced until the skin on his arms and neck felt needly and his back and chest sticky. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around his head, then went outside and sat on the front steps of the gym. Dance classes started at seven, but people usually arrived a half hour early. It was ten till six, now. Russell looked up and saw a myna bird cross the sky. Everything was dark gray and the clouds looked like the thick plumes of smoke and steam that lift from the ocean when, after miles of winding, rivers of pahoehoe finally reach the edge and spill to the water's surface. The trades blew gently,

rustling the leaves of the wild papaya trees on the other side of the street. Russell felt his sweaty skin tighten and the pores pucker as the breeze passed over him. He reached out with his palm up and felt the prick of one, two, three raindrops that couldn't have been larger than the head of a pin. He felt the noise of engines and exhaust pipes when a sedan, then a truck, and a pair of minivans shot past, the thrum hanging in the air even after the cars had disappeared over the top of the hill.

When he felt ready, Russell got up and went around the corner, on his way to lock the back door. The playground beside the gym was empty and quiet. When the the kids were small Russell and Lorrie would bring them here on the weekends to play, and sometimes on Sunday, to picnic. Now, the steel slide and frame of the swing set leaned like heaps of scrap metal in the evening light. Russell approached the rusty merry-go-round and as he passed he gripped the bar and leaned in, to get it spinning. It wobbled and squealed and rhythmed like music, to which he added the voices of Stephanie and Ian, screaming for a stop, screaming for speed.

Russell crossed the lawn and ducked under the awning, sticking out his hand into the rain as he walked. One, two, three porous, termite-eaten stairs to the porch of the back door, where he sorted through his ring of keys, holding up each at different angles, looking for the yellow-tagged one. He turned his back to the lamps of the baseball field and held each key above his head, until he found it. Russell closed and locked the door. He took a moment to watch the little leaguers play when he heard the ring of an aluminum bat, first against the ball, then on the dirt, and he clapped when one of the boys slid in to home. He watched a jogger, a man, go along the fence, coming down parallel to

the first base line, then curve around behind the backstop. The jogger was shirtless and well-built. His stride was long and consistent.

Russell was athletic. He used to be more athletic. When he was young everyone said that he was good at sports because he had height and long legs. That's why you could walk so early, cause of your legs, his mother would say. Hardly, you fell down. That's why, cause of that. Growing up, Russell had played as many sports as were offered in town, county leagues and high school teams, and did well in all of them. He liked volleyball the best. There was something about the subtlety of its aggression that he liked. It wasn't like football or basketball, sports where direct physicality against your opponent determined your aggression. The other sports were more like brawls, Russell thought. Volleyball was a gunfight.

The crack and hallow ring of the bat echoed out again. A player dove for first, scratching out a sound against the dirt that reached Russell after the boy had safely touched the base.

He used to play baseball with his cousin in the yard of his grandmother's home in Kurtistown. It wasn't really baseball, Russell guessed. He and Leonard would take turns. First, one would bat and the other would pitch. Then, they'd switch. And, it was the batter who fielded the balls, unless it was hit past the plumeria tree with the white flowers. That was a home run. The pitcher fielded the home runs. Leonard always

fielded. Sometimes Russell would field, anyway, because he knew Leonard couldn't do things well, sports and building stuff. Leonard was a handsome boy and it seemed to be enough for everyone, including Russell. When Leonard ran to field the home runs Russell liked to watch how his legs moved, awkward and soft. And, having watched his cousin go back and forth on those legs, sometimes further, or closer, sometimes far off to the left and into the neighbor's ginger patch, something would break inside of Russell and he'd tell Leonard that it was OK, he'd go get it this time.

The boys would go on like this, pitching, hitting and fielding, until they couldn't tell the difference between the ball and the sky. Then, they'd go into the house. They'd feed Bachan's fish and tap on the glass. They'd stand in front of the Babe Ruth-signed ball their grandmother had gotten when the Babe came to the Big Island, and they'd wonder about it, about how Babe Ruth had touched it once. How big do you think his hands are? I don't know, probably real big. Do you think they're fat? He's kind of fat so they're probably real fat, too. When Bachan called everyone in for dinner Russell would let Leonard go first, so that he could follow behind and watch his cousin's skinny thighs and funny walk. At the table, he and Leonard would sneak faces at each other, secretly mocking Bachan when she talked. Plenty food, eat. Wait. Prayer, yeah? *Ittadakemasu*, she'd say before anyone could touch their food.

Dinners were silent for the boys. They ate and listened to the grownups – Dad and Mom, Uncle Glen and Auntie Kerri – talk to Bachan about her papayas; was it a good season or a bad season, a good price or a bad price? Bachan always talked about the stealers who'd come onto her property to take all the good papayas. Filipinos, cannot

trust. Always stealing. No shame. She described people this way. Some people had shame, but many didn't. The Hawaiians – no shame. The Koreans – no shame. The Puerto Ricans – no shame. The Ha'oles – no shame. The neighbor had no shame because when she fought with her husband she'd scream loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear and get the dogs barking. The clerk at Kitagawa's Store had no shame because he gave women funny looks when they came in. Russell had never heard his grandmother say it, but he assumed she thought his grandfather had no shame, too. He'd left her and the kids, and returned to Japan with another woman. Bachan never talked about her husband having or not having shame because she never talked about him.

On the day that Russell decided to ask Leonard if he could touch his thighs he had taken his cousin out of view, into the neighbor's ginger patch and sat him down in the stalks, because it felt like a question people with no shame would ask. He asked Leonard to role up his shorts.

"Weird, your legs," Russell said. "Kind of like girl legs."

"Why, cause it's skinny?"

"I don't know." Russell leaned back and studied both legs, from ankle to waist. "Maybe not all like girl legs, but a little bit."

"Just because your legs are fat…"

Russell broke off a ruler-sized piece of ginger stalk and spun it in his fingers. He sat up and plowed back and forth in the soil with the end of the stalk, until he'd carved a

groove a few inches deep. He wiped the muddy end on Leonard's thigh and laughed when Leonard took the stalk and hit him in the shoulder several times with it. When Leonard had stopped hitting and Russell had stopped laughing, Russell asked Leonard if he could touch his leg with his fingers. Leonard said no. He said stop being weird, then got up and left the ginger patch.

Russell wondered if Leonard remembered that. If he did remember, he hadn't shown signs of it, hadn't acted strange, never mentioned anything. He'd forgotten about it, probably. It was so long ago. But, there was a chance that Leonard still remembered, and didn't want to talk about it, the way Bachan didn't talk about her husband, the way no one talked about him.

How often did Russell's kids talk about him, and when they did, what did they say? He hoped they said good things. He hoped they told their friends that he was a good man. A regular, good man. He hoped these things as he walked on the sidewalk that ran under the awning, toward the front entrance of the gym. The rain was getting heavy. The musty scent of the puddled lawn and parking lot pavement felt warm and suffocating in his nose.

Nikki says good things about me, Russell thought. She's easy-going. When Russell came home with his ear pierced, Nikki seemed OK with it. Lorrie got upset. This was a year, or two, before they'd had the blow up. Oh, God, Lorrie said, then made a long distance call to tell Stephanie what her father had done. Ian didn't say anything. He nodded and asked if it hurt. Russell said it didn't and told Ian that he should get one, too.

No way, Ian said.  When Nikki saw the earring her eyes got big. She covered her mouth and gasped. You're crazy, Dad, she said. Later that week, while helping Russell shop for a leather jacket, Nikki mentioned the earring.

"Mom's still pissed about the earring," Nikki said.

"I know. How's this one?" Russell held out his arms in an imaginary embrace and watched his steps and posture in the mirror.

"The shoulders are kind of big, yeah? But, it still looks OK."

"I look like a mobster." Russell returned the jacket to the rack and looked for another. "What'd she say?"

"You're embarrassing. Stuff like that."

"She told me to take it out."

"Are you going to do it? Maybe you should."

Russell found a jacket he liked and put it on and looked at himself in the mirror. He swayed and moved his hips, then waltzed in loops around the racks and shelves. He dipped in front of a customer who was trying to get to the register, then did a quickstep back to the mirror."This is the one."

"I like it. Just don't ever do that again." Nikki was laughing through her hand.

"This is the one." Russell twisted his body in front of the mirror to see how the back looked. "Good fit, this one."

Russell went around the corner and walked toward the front door. He had one foot inside, on the court, when he heard a voice.

"Hey, you closing up now?"

Russell turned and saw a blonde, young man who was in his early twenties. He had a beard. He was shirtless. He was soaked and breathing heavily. Russell watched the way the muscles in the young man's abdomen became more defined every time the young man breathed in, and how the striated lines of his stomach would disappear when he breathed out. Russell recognized the young man's shape and build; the jogger from the baseball field.

"Sorry, the gym is closed already," Russell said. "We close at 5:30, Monday through Friday. And, open court is at four."

"I'm not trying to get on the court or anything," the young man said. "I just need to use your phone really quick. I'm an idiot." He lifted his shoulders and showed his palms to Russell, as if to say, *I don't know.* "I locked my keys in the car, my phone, too. See that silver Acura parked out there on the side of the road?" He came up beside Russell and turned, pointed in the direction of the street. "You can't really see it through the rain."

"I see it," Russell said, though he could not.

Russell lead the young man to his office. He showed him the phone, lifted the receiver and handed it to him. “No calls to China,” Russell said, snickering. He felt stupid. The young man dialed and held the receiver to his shoulder with his ear. He pointed to the leather jacket that was hanging on the door.

“Yours?”

Russell nodded and the man gave a thumbs up.

“Yeah, Chris… You won’t believe this shit,” the young man said to the person on the phone. He arranged for someone to pick up a spare key from his house. Then, the conversation turned. “Why, did she call you?”

Russell didn’t know where to look. He didn’t want to look at the young man. Still, when the young man would turn away from him, Russell couldn’t look elsewhere. It made him feel like there weren’t any words, not a thought in his head. His consciousness felt as if it were drying up and what little of it remained he used to perceive the slightest movements and turning motions made by the young man. When Russell sensed he was about to be caught he lowered his gaze and watched the drops of water drip from the young man and pool on the floor around his feet.

“Don’t worry about it,” the young man said into the phone. “Sorry you had to deal with her.”

When the young man had finished and hung up he shook Russell’s hand and thanked him. His hands were tough and calloused. Russell liked the way they felt.

"Sorry about the puddle. I'll–"

"No, no, don't worry. I'll mop it up. Easy."

Russell walked the young man to the door. The young man waited on the sidewalk, under the roof. Russell locked the door and turned out the lights in the gym. Back in his office, he cracked the blinds and watched the young man pace and stretch on the sidewalk. Within five minutes a black car with tinted windows pulled up and the young man got in.

Russell slumped in his chair. He was alone again, in the quiet. The florescent light above him buzzed and clinked a three beat count. Clink, clink, clink… He fingered his earlobe and rubbed the indention where the earring used to be. He squeezed the dense scar tissue where the needle had burrowed through his skin. He looked at the computer screen and the mouse and the keyboard. He ran his finger along the spacebar, pressed it and the computer woke from its sleep. Russell stood up and turned off the light. He sat in the dark for five minutes, then five more. Just staring. He sat in the dark and listened to his dance students pull into the parking lot, to the gravel crunching under their tires. He sat in the dark and heard pounding on the front door and several voices calling his name. He heard three students outside his window.

"Did he cancel?"

"I didn't hear anything."

"I didn't hear anything, too."

He sat in the dark of his office while the class talked in the parking lot. He couldn't hear what they were saying but he felt the tones of each of their voices, like muddled melodies. He closed his eyes and saw himself standing in the ready position, arms out in an imaginary embrace. He saw the way he moved forward, then back, a turn, a lean, then forward again. The bolero in his head grew louder and as it did Russell could feel the weight of the beat growing heavier on his lips: slow, quick, quick.

# CATTLE

It was my grandfather's moist palm on my forehead that I felt when I woke in the dark. And, he was saying something, his breath on me, the scent of rot and saliva.

"Was nothing, boy. No worries."

His calloused palm scraped my forehead as he ran his arthritic fingers through my hair. He grunted and moaned as he lowered himself to lay beside me on the quilt, squirmed as he took off his boots. In the air was the scent of liquor and sweat.

"No worries. No worries."

He asked me what I'd seen in my sleep.

"I was dreaming about the cow I saw today," I said. "Down in the boneyard. The mom cow and the baby."

"Which one?"

"The one with the baby, where the baby is coming out."

I heard him scratch his unshaven face.

He turned away. Breathed deeply and began to cough. He cleared his throat and wet his lips. Then, just the sound of the house. And, I awake, alone – the wind brushing against the walls, stirring the grass in the yard, a night time sigh that rattled and soaked the window, rattled the door – imagined what the boneyard looked like, out there in this dark, the bending blades of grass altogether rippling under wind and rain that was now

pouring into the hollow and filling it with the stuff that would make the animal bodies disappear with time.

In Waimea the rain is a mist that slants with the wind, and comes in sharp and stinging. That morning, when me and Mom arrived at my grandfather's property, he told us that the weather was turning, pointed to the clouds coming from the east, and I could already feel bits of wet against my face making my nose itch. He had been sitting on the porch repairing a tarp when we greeted him, and when he stood to go inside, we followed.

We'd made this trip so many times that year, me and Mom every other Saturday. January of 1959, I'd met my grandfather for the first time. I was thirteen. The two-hour bus ride took us north, from Hilo, through every Hamakua sugar town – Ninole, Pepe'ekeo, Laupahoehoe, Pauilo – the Pacific to the east and sugar cane fields to the west. Passed over Honoka'a Town as the road curved inland, taking us up into the Honoka'ia forest, and when we'd come out the land and the sky would open up big and wide. Views of grassland and cattle replaced the stretch of cane and ocean. Men on horseback wearing flat-crowned hats with wide brims, in the old vaquero style, coming alongside the bus, clicking their tongues and pulling on the reins of their horses, whose hooves clacked high, hollow sounds on the road as they trotted to and from town.

My grandfather lived a few miles south of Waimea town, out toward Mauna Kea, on the Pu'u Kapu plain, on 300 acres of land he'd gotten in a Department of Hawaiian Homelands lottery, back when it was run by the Federal Government: a 99-year lease with a 50% blood minimum requirement. He'd built a stilted, plantation-style house that

sat on a hill near the center of the property. Red dirt in wind, rust-scarred roof, made the once-white house tawny. Inside, quilts and blankets lay folded in the corner and a large chest containing clothes and keepsakes was set in another. The dining table was pushed against the wall, beneath the sill of the large picture window that looked out toward the western paddocks. Dusty brown, inside, and scents of lacquer, leather, and manure, the wood mustier when the rainy season came, mustiest that trip in December, the last time I saw my grandfather alive. Me and Mom climbing the steps to the porch, following him through the doorway, smelling it, the lacquer first, the saddles and boots, the mildewed beams of the open ceiling. He folded the tarp he'd been repairing and placed it in the corner at the door.

"Is he doing good in school?" he asked later, pointing at me with his chin from the other side of the dining table. At the center was a large pot of beef stew simmering on the portable gas burner. Mom filled my grandfather's bowl, then mine, then hers, telling him, as she ladled, that I always did well in school.

"It's that Ha'ole blood where he gets that from. The brains not from us," he said.

Mom glared at him. She fidgeted with her napkin, wiping her palms over and over again. I imagine that she was searching for the perfect phrasing that would save her from an argument, as had happened during past visits. They were still unable to talk about my father, a marine from Idaho who had been stationed at Camp Tarawa during World War II.

"That's not true," she said. "You're a smart man." She reminded him of all the work he'd done on his property, how he'd built it up from nothing.

"Not the same," he said.

"But, you have Ha'ole blood, too," I said. "Your last name is a Ha'ole name."

My grandfather kept his eyes on his bowl. It was a different kind of thing, he said, blowing on a spoonful of stew, slurping at the broth until a single piece of beef remained. It was different, perhaps, because what Ha'ole blood he did have he could trace back to nineteenth century, New England missionaries. Different, because his Ha'ole ancestors arrived here with a Bible in hand. My father arrived in military dress, carrying a rifle. It was a different kind of thing because, as he had once told me, my father had seduced my mother, who was too young and stupid to know any better. It was different because I did not meet the blood requirement for the lease, and could never take over the property.

"We had to put one of the calves down yesterday. The leg broke when was going through the chute and couldn't do nothing. Cost more money to fix."

I waited, but he said nothing more, nothing about the blood and all that, nothing about the noise, only chewed and swallowed, saying it was shame and a waste.

I had seen the cattle on branding days. I'd watched the ranchers gather the weaning paddock and drive them to the corral. They'd run the calves down the chute and into the squeeze. Cut notches in the ears of the females and castrate the males. Tag them. Push irons bearing my grandfather's symbol into their hides that sent streams of smoke and a sulfurous stench into the air. The animals would bellow and fight and bleed. It wasn't often on a branding day that my grandfather needed his revolver. But, as he was saying now, through a mouthful of mushed beef, sometimes the calves fight too hard.

“It’s in the corral, still. Need take it down the boneyard today,” he said.

After lunch he cleared the table and took the dishes out to the catchment spigot to wash. I took off my shirt and lay down on the quilt in the corner. Later, my grandfather was back on the porch with the tarp in hand. He sat still, threading and pulling, threading and pulling, having a conversation with himself that took place at the edge of his lips. How his hands vibrated almost imperceptibly as he patched the hole in the canvas. How his elastic-like thumb bent back nearly 90 degrees, gripping the needle. He had the strangest fingers. Always when he spoke. When he'd say important things. How he'd put his hands out in front with the crooked fingers spread wide, kinking wildly at the joints. And curving the hands down toward each other, until the outside edges of the palms touched, he'd make a semi-circle motion, as if shaping a bowl out of the air. A way to show what he was saying, perhaps, because he spoke so little.

When he’d finished repairing the tarp, he stood and snapped the dirt and dead grass from its folds, eyed the stitches. He said he was going out, wanted to take care of the dead calf before the weather worsened.

“Can I come, too?” I asked him.

“What for?”

“Help,” I said.

“You don’t know what to do.” He was at the door, slipping into an army green poncho. “Hey,” he called to Mom. “You want him out with the weather like this?”

Mom told me to stop bothering my grandfather. “He’s busy,” she said.

“I’m not bothering him,” I said.

She was at the dining table, her face made up, and she was dabbing plumeria oil on her neck. Her red mu'u mu'u lay across the back of the chair beside the umbrella.

“If he gets sick, not my fault,” my grandfather said. He pulled the hood of the poncho over his head and stepped out onto the porch. “Hurry up, then,” he said to me. “The weather is only getting worse.”

"Go," Mom said.

Perdy would be waiting for her at the front gate. His property bordered my grandfather’s to the south. Mom and my grandfather hadn’t spoken since my birth, but it was at Perdy’s request, late in 1958, that Mom and me made that first trip to Waimea. It had been a little over a year since we received that first letter from my grandfather, asking her if she remembered Perdy, and would she like to meet with him. A squat and dusty old man, ugly even, Perdy had made it to mid-life without marrying, and intended for Mom to marry him.

Go.

Mom always said that. When I was small I'd ask her to walk to the ocean at King's Landing, a distance of several miles. “Go,” she’d say, never asking who I was going with, or what time I’d be back. Growing up, I’d `known Mom to be a large woman, a slow woman, whose movements were slight, never more than needed. Once, just after the Andrade kid drowned in a cave upriver, I said I was going swimming up Wailuku.

"Go. Do what you like."

Even as I heard my grandfather kickstart the Speed Twin outside, and the engine revved over the noise of the weather, the RPMs falling, idling, and then the return of the rattling window, the dripping from the awning, the rain striking the metal roof, Mom seemed no more, no less concerned. She sat at the dining table, holding the mirror out in front, so that when I waved from the doorway, she couldn't see me. We'd meet her in the morning, as we always did, on the chapel steps.

On the back of the cycle the rain and wind hit us like hale. Fog was rolling in from the Saddle, limiting visibility to a few yards in every direction. We dipped and climbed over hills, through grass that was waist high in places and in others, where the cattle were grazing, mowed to the mud. We slowed for the puddles and paddock gates only. Then the speed again, and the pelting wind and rain. The engine beneath me numbing

Near the corral my grandfather downshifted. Arms tight around his torso, I felt his body ease with the cut of the engine. We coasted, silently closing the distance between us and the carcass. It was a tiny thing, laying on its side. My grandfather unfolded the tarp and laid it over the mud, beside the calf. As I came closer I saw the wound at the center of it's forehead, the brown-black blood coagulated around it. Like the other animals who didn't live long enough to make it to the slaughterhouse, this calf was being taken to the boneyard, a hollow at the western edge of the property, to bloat and stink, to be infested with flies and worms.

I knew the boneyard well. Often I'd play there, alone, among the wasting animals. I wielded femurs against invisible armies and stomped on horned skulls half-buried in the

soft soil. I'd be Eisenhower or Patton charging across the battlefield, stabbing the distended bellies until entrails spilled from the wound. Most often, I was William Holden, screaming, *Kill the Japs! Kill em!,* gunning down the enemy with a knotted guava branch. A shot taken to the chest and I'd fall face first in the grass, grabbing and scratching at my shirt, gurgling, making what I thought were the sounds the dying make.

William Holden.

I remember the first time I saw him. It was in *Sabrina.* There he was, 20 feet tall on the Palace Theater screen, in Hilo. William Holden as David Larrabee, the playboy in sport jackets and straw hats. And, there was the exotic, redwood smell of the theater's banisters and seats, a scent that, even in my old age, brings the scenes and music from that picture to mind. The smell also leaves me aching for a ghost.

See, I used to imagine my father to be just like David Larrabee, in looks and temperament. In the dark, on the upper deck of the Palace Theater, I saw my father to be a handsome man, clever-talking, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed man with a warm face. I never knew much about him. Mom didn't know much too. He shipped off and died on Iwo Jima without ever knowing about me.

If she talked about my father, Mom never said much. She always said she was telling everything she knew. That his name was William. That he had blonde hair. I get the height and the olive eyes from him. But, the hands are my grandfather's.

"Hold here," my grandfather said, squatting beside the calf, the ends of the rope hanging limp from his hands.

I pushed against the knot with my palm and he finished tying it, looping and crossing the rope over the back of my hand, tightening the knot once I'd slipped my hand out.

"Lift it."

I lifted one side of the bundled calf as my grandfather further wrapped it with another piece of rope. He hitched it to the back of the cycle. We were going again, the engine rumbling low as we dragged the calf through the mud of the corral, down the hill, parting the tall grass of paddock five and six, down the side of the western hollow, into the boneyard. There, we unwrapped the calf and he folded up the tarp. A few yards away there was a freshly rotting animal laying on its side, whose outline I could barely make out through the fog.

"Where you going?" he said.

"To look."

I approached the animal from the front. It's milky gray eyes watched me come closer. Tongue hung from the mouth. I tapped it with my shoe. The wet, distended belly and the stench. My body's tiny convulsions. I lifted my shirt collar over my nose and still, the stench.

"Boy, we go already."

As I circled the animal I saw something between its hind legs. A rust-colored thing, an organ maybe. But there were no wounds. I kicked at the grass around it, then pulled until I saw a pair of tiny hooves, hind legs that disappeared into the heifer. I had never seen anything like it.

“There’s a baby, too.” I yelled.

“It’s nothing boy. No worries.”

Perhaps it was coincidence that my grandfather told me the story of Ikua Kaleohano that night, after waking me and asking what I’d seen in my sleep. Perhaps the telling of the story was a moment of grace. As we lay there in the dark, perhaps the story of the Kaleohano family represented the ideal, which, for the first time in his life, seemed possible.

His back still turned to me, he began to cough again, though it was much worse this time. I could feel his body convulsing beside me, clenching and releasing. He swallowed what had been loosened in his throat. I heard his lips part.

"The Kaleohano family..." he said.

“Who?” I said.

He had told me many stories, always in the dark, late, and only after drinking. He'd wake me to talk and slur through stories about all the beautiful women he’d been with, or a dead friend that he missed – most were dead – or a time when his father gave him lickens. If I fell asleep he'd nudge me so he could continue. He talked about the burial caves in Kawaihai. The haunted forest down Mud Lane. But mostly, he talked about families. Who was from which family. About so-and-so, who had married into another family. The tempers of families, the looks of others.

“The Kaleohano family, from Kona side. You know them, yeah? We related to them through the Paiva family. You Hilo boy, so you don’t know. They the ones get 100

acres up Hualalai. They get 50 or 60 head Hereford pipi."

He paused. Wanted me to say something.

"You know, one of the boys plays for Konawaena. Real fast."

He waited. Groaned.

“Get one story about the Kaleohanos. Long time ago had one guy named Ikua Kaleohano. He was the one first got that 100 acres. How he got the money, who knows? Ikua had one wife and one baby on the way, but both the baby and the wife went *make* during the birth. Ikua, this guy, his heart was broken. That’s what the old-timers say. He came real religious after that, the kind where you pray every day, and every time you talk to the guy, all he like do is talk about God. He still worked the land. Started laying fence lines. Bought couple head cattle. The whole time he was praying. They said he was praying for his wife and his baby and he was praying for himself too, that could fix his heart.

"You try ask the old-timers about Ikua. They going tell you he was a little bit crazy. People stopped talking to him, they stopped seeing him. He never came down Waimea side anymore. For years and years nobody saw him. Then, he started coming town again. He was going around telling people he had one new son. Could describe the boy and all. From his ehu-color hair all the way down to the big toe, which was long and skinny. Ikua was telling everybody that the boy was one miracle from God, cause he was praying so long. The people said to him, 'Ikua, you get one baby but no wife, no woman, how can?"

"He said he met one woman one night, up on his property. She had dark skin and gray hair," he said. She stayed with him. He said she went fix his heart. She had his baby, too. New baby. The next day she was gone, disappeared."

My grandfather nudged me with his shoulder and asked if I was still awake, cause he didn't want to be talking to no one.

"Is that real?"

"Plenty people think was one lie, but how can? Where the baby came from, then? Some people think was Pele. Me, I don't know."

"Where's the boy? Is he still alive?"

"He grew up. Took over the land when Ikua when *make*, short time later. The son, too, went *make* in his thirties. Thrown from a mule on the trail down to Honokane'iki. All the Kaleohanos come from that line. Real talented family, the Kaleohanos. Good ranchers. I think people believe the story more now after they seen how special that family is."

My grandfather ran his hand through my hair once more. Overhead, the roof rattled, the window, too. The rain had picked up and its patter against the house was like radio static. Then, all at once, the noise stopped, as if the weather were between breathes. I fell asleep to the sound of my grandfather snoring.

He died later that month.

He would not be there when we moved into Perdy's house a few weeks later. He would not see the wedding. He would never know that after years of trying Mom and

Perdy could not have children. He would not have to watch his property pieced and parceled to new ranchers.

When we found his body it was face down near in the corral, bloated and stiff, the purple skin blistering. Flies crowded around the open sores and crawled along the flaking skin of the lips, in and out of the mouth. The face was unrecognizable. I remember thinking this wasn't anyone I knew. Wasn't anyone. Just something my grandfather had left behind. When I saw the rigid, bent wrists and the curling fingers only then did I feel afraid. Mom wouldn't look. She covered her face and started toward the house.

Later that day, I wrapped what was left of my grandfather in the tarp and dragged the bundle out out of the corral and up the hill. I leaned back and pulled, pushed with my legs, squatted low to push off again. I was facing the western paddocks as I dragged his body along the ridge of a hill, toward the house, as I strained and sweated to pull it over rocks and dirt, through thick grass. The western paddocks lay stretched out before me, the boneyard in the shadow of the hollow at the western fence.